

The Skill of Storytelling

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Telling stories to children is indeed a skill. Let us see what the nuances are in telling a story.

It is rather lamentable that there is no separate daily ‘period’ for storytelling in our primary schools for the first two grades. Had such a system been in place, the problem of retaining children in school would have been solved at least to an extent. Many people would say that I am underestimating the seriousness of this problem. It is quite possible that on hearing my suggestion, many high officials would smile with contempt. Their vast experience and administrative knowledge must have driven from their mind the understanding, which I think they must have had at one time, that storytelling has a magical effect on children.

It is immensely lamentable that even our teacher training institutions do not take storytelling seriously, although some of them do mention the importance of storytelling in their curriculum.

I envision a day when every teacher teaching young children would be expected to have command over at least thirty traditional stories. By command, I imply that they would remember these stories well enough to be able to narrate them with ease and confidence. This is no big feat for a society that has an old legacy of thousands of stories. Thirty such stories, which the teacher can narrate at will, would change the environment of the first two grades of primary school. The only condition is that storytelling should be given a respectable place in daily curriculum with the belief that storytelling is important in itself.

Where to get the stories from?

I would like to clarify an adjective I have used in the previous paragraph before proceeding further. I have written that I am in favour of telling traditional stories. My experience with training young teachers in storytelling shows that when asked to find stories to tell, they often bring up stories from some children’s magazine. Some of them bring up comics stories while others bring up long jokes and real-life anecdotes. It is true that this type of material can also be classified as a ‘story’, but we cannot hope for every such story to have a magical effect on six- or seven-year-olds studying in primary school.

Stories inherited traditionally have characteristics that are not necessarily found in contemporary stories that we find in various forms and media. We will discuss these features shortly, but first I would like to mention some sources of traditional stories. First of all: Panchatantra, Jataka, Mahabharata, Sahasra Rajni Charitra, stories of Vikramaditya and folk tales of different regions can be placed in the category of simple and rich sources. After these we can place the stories of Katha Sarratsagar, Gulistan and Bostan and folk tales from around the world. These sources are not readily available. So if one wants to give storytelling a regular place in the curriculum, one has to make a compilation of stories selected from all these sources.

A story worth telling

A simple way to find out what characteristics a good story has is to examine a story that children have been listening to with pleasure for generations. The story of the lion and the hare (rabbit) from the Panchatantra is one such example. Its plot is not as easy as we assume from our acquaintance with the story. Why don’t we first remember the main turning points of this story.

There comes a day in the story when the little rabbit has to appear before the old lion. The rabbit has delayed reaching the lion's door so much that the lion is going crazy with hunger. This crucial moment is so not the right time for any kind of bargaining with the lion who is fuming with anger, yet the rabbit interjects at this inopportune moment as to what took him so long. The talk of encountering another lion on the way is completely false, but it settles in the regal mind of a hungry, angry lion. Now he wants to deal with his opponent first and for this he walks with the rabbit towards the well where he had been told the other lion lives. At this second crucial moment, the rabbit moves forward, relying on his own deceit and the lion's mad resentment and jealousy, which has been aroused by none other than the rabbit. Mistaking his own shadow in the well for the other lion, the lion loses his temper and jumps to death.

Let us take a closer look at this old, familiar story. First of all, there is no preaching in the content of the story. On the contrary, the story grapples directly with such serious questions as how to protect oneself in the face of a demonic force or the very real threat of death. Usually, we do not raise such questions while talking to children, but it is obvious that children have a keen interest in such questions. We can ask what is the reason for this interest, but I will discuss this question in a moment. For now, I would like to consider another feature. This is the story of a small creature who is struggling with the trouble created by a big mighty creature. To get out of this trouble, the small creature uses such a trick, which we usually call unethical.

In applying this trick, the rabbit exemplifies some fine personality traits. These qualities include courage, self-confidence in the face of danger, the ability to keep a cool head until the very last moment of a tricky situation, and to behave appropriately before those of greater strength and age.

We should also note how fast the story moves forward. In the beginning, a strange system is established under which every day an animal is to voluntarily become the old king's prey. Soon after, it is the turn of the little rabbit, and the central plot of the story is revealed. The rest of the events happen very quickly, as the rabbit can't waste a single moment after deciding on a dangerous strategy to protect himself. The story listener is pushed through one situation after another through dialogue. It is clear that the listener has no choice but to look at the situation from the rabbit's point of view.

This brief analysis is sufficient to identify the reasons why this story has gained immense popularity among children. First of all, the story gives them a character, a hero, with whom they can completely identify. This character is a rabbit. His character in the story goes through similar trials and tribulations that children often go through in their daily lives. He is small and powerless, he has to do something he does not want to do, he is afraid of being killed by a creature who has all the power as well as physical strength. Aspects similar to those in the rabbit's situation keep emerging in the life of every child. Although we often do not notice these because we are too busy playing the roles of parents and teachers. For example, very few of us know that the fear of sudden death is one of the biggest sources of anxiety in childhood. The apprehension of coming face to face with a big and strong person also creates similar anxiety.

The story grabs children's attention as soon as it starts because children can see themselves in the story. Their attraction is then reinforced by the events of the story. The little rabbit chooses a strategy and it proves to be effective. It not only succeeds for him, but ends the problem once and for all. Small children like such solution. Another reason for this allure of the rabbit's strategy is that it hinges on a naïve desire always found in children – the desire to make excuses. Yet another attraction in the rabbit's excuse for being late is that his aim is not just to save his own life, but to kill the lion as well. In fact, the rabbit's dilemma is so difficult because he cannot save himself without killing the unjust (lion). Similarly, the story makes use of valiant destruction to present a terrific drama of survival. If there is any morality in it, it is the morality of self-defence. We can see this thing properly

only when we look at the story from the point of view of a child. If we insist on seeing this story through the eyes of adults, we would come to the conclusion that it is an immoral story—which it actually is.

What is the need?

By now it must be clear that for children listening to a good story has nothing to do with ethics or moral education, or at least not directly. On a deeper level, there is something inspiring about the story of the rabbit and the lion. It shows the benefits of keeping a cool head in the face of danger. The story also shows how important it is to use common sense and imagination. But these things cannot be called 'moral education' in the traditional sense. In fact, great traditional stories rarely teach morals in the traditional sense. What is more important for us to note is that the purpose of storytelling is not the moral development of the child. The benefits of storytelling are quite varied, and they are as follows.

Stories develop the ability to listen well: Who is a good listener? The one who listens till the end. We cannot say this about many people. Even during formal debates, people continue to interrupt. This is because of their habit of assuming that they already know what the speaker will say. Another reason is that they do not have the patience to listen. It comes as no surprise that listening is now considered not just a skill, but an attitude, with advanced management and administration courses to encourage it! Storytelling develops the ability to listen patiently at a crucial time in our lives when listening habits and attitudes can become life-long habits.

It is a bit strange that good listeners have become a rarity in our country which has an old and strong oral culture. My guess is that this situation is related to the neglect towards storytelling in childhood. It seems that modern India does not have time to regularly tell stories to children. The consequences of this shortcoming are now becoming apparent.

Storytelling trains the ability to predict: Children want to hear stories they like over and over again. This is because once they are introduced to the story, they use this familiarity to test their growing ability to listen intently. It is natural that this test happens unconsciously. Children are delighted that they can successfully guess what will happen next in the story the second or third time they listen to it. The joy of having a prediction proved right is the reward an experienced listener gets from hearing a story, and it is not just joy. This also increases the confidence of the child listening to the story in their ability to predict. This belief has a deep role to play in all round development—especially in the development of the ability to read. This ability is the biggest challenge in the first two grades of school. I have discussed in detail the contribution of the ability to predict in the development of literacy and the ability to learn in my book *The Child's Language and the Teacher*.

The ability to predict is also an important contributor to studying other subjects, especially Mathematics and Science. The use of rules to solve problems has theoretical significance in the study of Mathematics. There are rules even in stories. The difference is that these rules are in the form of metaphors. For example, many stories follow the rule that smaller creatures gain victory by tricking older ones. This is what happens in the story of the rabbit and the lion. As children listen to stories, they catch the rules intrinsic in them, and this grip improves their ability to predict.

Stories expand our world: I am talking about the world we carry in our heads or minds. Stories expand it in the sense that through them we get to know people and situations we have never come across in our lives.

The question is, what is the use of knowing such people or situations? The advantage is that they are a part of life. Even though we may not know them personally, they disturb us mentally, especially in childhood—but in a general sense this trouble lasts for a lifetime.

For example, small children worry about bad people, even there may not be any bad person around them. Similarly, they hope deep down that they will get a chance to meet someone very smart, beautiful or good. Imagination of ideal form and fear of dire calamity, both are involved in child psychology. Traditional stories express this mindset, and that is why they appeal to children easily. By listening to stories, a small child, who is not yet literate, gets to experience the imagined form of a world much bigger than his real world.

There is one more thing that the experience one gets from stories is not random. On the contrary, this experience moulds our chaotic world into a satisfactory order or texture. In a deeper sense, it is a 'moral' texture—but not in a general sense. The weak do win, but often by using the wrong means. An example is the rabbit lying to a hungry lion.

Listening to Stories and Reading

Finally, we can see the importance of storytelling in the expansion of the child's linguistic means. Words are a very personal asset. They give us the ability to give different names to things in the world in a very personal sense. But on the other hand, words are also a social asset that we use to share our experiences with others. It is this two-way nature of words that gives them meaning. For example, a child knows from personal experience how the lion must feel when hungry. The story helps the child to expand the meaning of the word 'hunger' in such a way that the lion is also included in it. The more stories children hear, the more their vocabulary will be able to incorporate the meaning of others' experiences. Viewed this way, the stories heard in childhood become the basis of the ability to read later.

In fact, all the four things mentioned above in the context of story apply to reading as well. The ability to read introduces children to the set rules and structures of language. The ability to read well depends on the habit of making intelligent guesses. By becoming familiar with the rules of the language, children can anticipate what is going to come next in a sentence or statement. Storytelling from this perspective is useful for making children literate.

The Skill of Telling Stories

A person seeking to master the art of storytelling must take memory seriously. If the narrator does not remember the story properly, then he can ruin even the best story. Memorization builds confidence and makes the storyteller feel at ease. Ease or calmness is very important for building a relationship with the listeners of the story. Secondly, so long as the story is well remembered, the narrator can use it as a blueprint or a blank map.

This map can be filled according to your convenience or the mood of the listeners. Making the story short or long is very important. Someday you may want to quickly reach the point where the rabbit is standing in front of the lion. Some other day you may wish to expand on the first part of the story, discussing in detail the thoughts going through the lion's mind while waiting for the food, and the ideas and strategies emerging in the rabbit's mind on way to the lion's den.

Conversations with children about the story offer a variety of options. If you want, speak in two voices in a dramatic way, use gestures or postures as well. You can also use hand puppets to make the

dialogue come alive. You can take on the role of both characters yourself by walking from one corner of the room to the other. All these possibilities are interesting. And they challenge us to build on our ability to tell the same story year after year, or even several times in a year.

The daily life of a teacher can never be boring if storytelling is included in it. But to make storytelling an everyday occurrence, we need to seriously change our perceptions of the primary school curriculum.

Story: How the rabbit came to be called intelligent

One day a long time ago, lion the king of the jungle got tired of hunting for food daily. He thought, since all the animals unquestionably regard him as their king, instead of running after the prey, he would command the animals that one of them should come to satisfy his hunger every day.

He called the animals of the forest to him and said, "My subjects, I have to hunt daily for my food, and because of that the whole forest is afraid of me. I kill only one animal everyday and eat it, but you all stay scared. Now let us make a logical arrangement. Every morning an animal would present itself to me to be eaten by me. You can decide among yourselves which animal it will be. That way I will be saved from the trouble of hunting. This would also mean that all of you would be able to roam fearlessly in the woods. The animals discussed among themselves and agreed that this would be a method beneficial to all. They decided that a lot would be drawn every evening. The one whose name was written on the slip, would become the lion's food the next day. This new scheme was immediately implemented: the slip would be drawn in the evening and the next morning a poor animal would present itself for the lion's breakfast. It was undoubtedly a very bad thing for the chosen animal but because of this, at least all other animals did not have to fear getting ambushed by the roaming lion, and they could live freely in the forest. The plan seemed to be working well.

One evening when the rabbit's name-slip came out, he announced that he had no intention of becoming the lion's food.

To this the fox said, "The lion is keeping his promise and now we can roam fearlessly outside."

The monkey said, "Rabbit, if you don't go, you will put us all in danger."

"I will put an end to this brute once and for all," said the rabbit with a confidence that he did not really feel. "Look, someday you'll all thank me."

"If we find that the lion has started hunting again, we will not thank you," said the wild rooster.

"Leave it all to me," said the rabbit and lay down comfortably. But the rabbit did not sleep. He lay for hours thinking what could be done to help himself and his companions and rid the jungle of the evil lion.

By morning, he thought of a solution. When he had thought through everything and was satisfied that his plan would work, he took a nap to refresh himself. He reached the lion's den when the sun had risen fully. The lion was waiting impatiently for him and growling loudly. He was angry, because one, the late arrival of the rabbit was a sign of disrespect, and second, he was hungry too. As the rabbit stepped forward, the lion roared, "Are *you* my breakfast?"

"Yes, my lord," replied the rabbit respectfully.

“Then why have you come late?” enquired the lion angrily.

“I’ll tell you, my lord,” said the rabbit. “When I was coming here early in the morning, I was stopped by another lion. He said I can’t go any further as he wants to have me for breakfast. I pleaded with him that I cannot stop, I have to reach the king of the jungle as per his orders. On this, he became very angry and started saying that he is the king of the jungle. And he roared, ‘Go and tell the lion who has encroached my authority that I am here, and I will come and kill you. Tell all the other animals too that the real king of the jungle has arrived and will drive away the hypocrite.’ That’s why, my lord,” the rabbit, “Before you make me your breakfast, I warn you that your life is in great danger.”

Furious with his hunger and this disrespect, the lion roared, “Hypocrite! He is the hypocrite. Take me to him now, I will show him who the real king of the jungle is.”

The rabbit started and the lion followed behind. “Now walk carefully, we are reaching the cave of that rebellious robber,” whispered the rabbit.

In truth, the rabbit was taking the lion towards a deep well. When he reached there, he asked the lion to halt a bit while he himself came near the well slowly. Then he started looking carefully at the water below from the top of the bank. He saw a clear reflection of his little face. Then he called out to the lion and said, “Look down here, this is the one who wants to snatch your rule.”

The lion reached the edge of the wall of the well, grumbling and shouting angrily. When he looked down, he saw the frowning and growling mouth of an angry lion staring at him. He jumped on that enemy, floundered for a while and then drowned.

The rabbit quickly returned to the other animals and announced that he had killed the lion and that their days of fear were over. Then he told everyone the story of his exploits and how he did it all. All the animals praised his cleverness.

From that day onwards, the animals would always go to the rabbit for advice to request him to solve their problems and settle disputes. This is how he came to be known as the ‘wise rabbit’.

Prof. Krishna Kumar is a renowned educationist and writer dedicated for thinking and writing on the issues of education. *Raj Samaj Aur Shiksha* and *Bachche Ki Bhasha Aur Adhyapak* are his popular works

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